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Disabled Operators: Training Disabled Ex-Servicemen as Projectionists during the Great War

Harry B. Parkinson is perhaps best known to historians of British film as the producer of the charming series *Wonderful London* (1924), as well as numerous other similar short programme-fillers, most of which are now sadly lost. In April 1917 though, aged 32, he was to be found defending himself against accusations of ‘obstinacy’ by the Surrey Appeal Tribunal Board over his application for exemption from military service. A year earlier when general conscription had been introduced, Parkinson had been passed by a medical officer as ‘A1’, but when he had reported to the Recruiting Depot in Surbiton to enlist, he was refused the opportunity to fight, re-classified as ‘C3’ and advised to ‘get work of national importance’ instead. As the local paper reported, he ‘then got the work described, and was teaching disabled soldiers how to work the cinema.’ Consequently, when he was recalled to the Tribunal Board in 1917, Parkinson’s application for an exemption was not only on medical grounds, but also because he argued it was now ‘in the national interests he should remain in civil life as he was engaged in training large numbers of disabled soldiers for the Cinema industry.’ Parkinson’s case was adjourned until a further medical examination could be conducted (*Surrey Advertiser*, 18/4/1917:1). In fact, he joined the RAF later that year.

Parkinson’s case is not unique. The following month in Newcastle Mr Rhagg, a cinema manager, submitted an application for exemption on behalf of his 26 year old ‘operator’ (as projectionists were then called), on the grounds that he was engaged in ‘training five wounded soldiers... who desired to qualify themselves as cinema operatives’. This, he emphasized was a formal position, appointed by the Cinematograph Exhibitors’ Association (CEA) for the northern counties as part of their ‘commendable scheme for teaching wounded soldiers to take various positions in cinema halls.’ Furthermore, through the good offices of the scheme, Mr Rhagg’s cinema was able to entertain up to 2,000 wounded soldiers every week, free of charge. As a result of this appeal Mr Rhagg’s operator was granted three months temporary exemption (*Newcastle Daily Journal*, 31/5/1917:3).

Meanwhile in Luton, Mr. Smith, the manager of the Park Street Picturedrome, was making a similar case in favour of Percival Custance, his 18 year old operator. As in Parkinson's case, there was confusion about the boy's medical condition – one which did not impress the board. 'He was passed A1,' observed one of the board members, 'and like all young fellows who don't want to go into the Army, he went to another doctor to enable him to say that the Medical Board know nothing about it.' Smith's response to this accusation revealed that he was not acting according to the boy's wishes at all, but in his own business interests. The boy *wanted* to go to the front, but Smith was unable to spare him immediately as he needed time to find another operator:

He went on to say that cinemas had now been recognized as of national importance. They could not conduct a cinema show without an operator and they had great difficulty in getting operators. They had to be trained or there might be a panic such as was recently the case at Deptford. He had girls in all other departments, but girls could not become operators, because of the conditions under which the men worked and the nerve required (*Luton News and Bedfordshire Advertiser*, 10/5/1917: 2).¹

Challenged on his claim that cinemas were 'of national importance', Smith was forced to concede that they weren't officially so designated, and that consequently cinema projectionists could not claim exemption purely on the grounds of their occupation. Nevertheless there was a further matter to consider – his business *was* on the list of restricted occupations he revealed, as 'they were training wounded soldiers.' On these grounds the board ruled that he could have a fortnight to find a replacement before the boy should be called up.

These three local newspaper reports from early 1917 offer vivid snapshots of the difficulties faced by cinema managers in Britain during the First World War. Those difficulties included not only staff shortages, but also the excessive interference of wartime bureaucracy, the inconsistent application of national policy at a local level, the officious and suspicious attitude of local officials, and the difficulties of running places of public assembly at a time of heightened public anxiety. The reports also reveal the remarkable pragmatism and resourcefulness of cinema managers in facing

those problems. In the examples above, a common strategy for resisting the demands of local bureaucrats was the claim that important work is being done training disabled ex-servicemen to work in cinemas, specifically as projectionists. Despite constant lobbying by the industry, which highlighted the importance of cinema for the maintenance of morale, for the dissemination of news and propaganda, and for the relaxation of weary war workers, the government never did declare cinema operation ‘work of national importance’ (Williams: 120-122). But local boards had considerable discretion in determining individual cases, and training wounded soldiers clearly *did* appeal to them as necessary and serious war work (*Birmingham Mail* 21/2/1918: 3).

This article is about those various schemes for training disabled ex-servicemen as ‘cinema operators’. Drawing primarily on reports in trade papers and local newspapers, I will trace the development of these schemes from relatively small scale local beginnings in the early years of the war, through their heyday around 1917-18, to their abrupt abandonment at the war’s close. I will argue that the schemes can be understood as a good example of the ‘practical patriotism’ which Leslie Midkiff DeBauche and Michael Hammond suggest was a characteristic of the cinema industry’s response to wartime conditions both in Britain and America (DeBauche: xvi, Hammond: 6). On the one hand, they helped to ameliorate the acute shortage of skilled cinema staff suffered by the industry throughout the war. For managers such as Smith (above), trained disabled ex-servicemen were a preferable alternative to the women and teenagers who were commonly found in projection boxes by 1916-17. On the other hand, the actual number of men trained was quite small – only 200 were reported to have completed training by the CEA by 1918 (in a country with an estimated 4,500 permanent cinemas) (Williams: 116, 126). The greater benefit of such schemes was in the good publicity they attracted for the cinema trade itself as one intimately involved in the war effort (*Yorkshire Post*, 3/8/1918: 10). Thus the schemes can be seen alongside a whole range of other war-related and charity fundraising activities that cinema managers enthusiastically supported and publicized, not only because they benefited the war effort, but also because they boosted business by establishing the centrality of the cinema in the public and patriotic life of the community (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 14/11/1918: 83).

If there is a hint of cynicism in my choice of introductory vignettes, and in the emphasis here on the public relations benefits of such schemes, it is perhaps informed by the way that the story ends. Schemes for training wounded soldiers (not just in cinema projection, but in a whole range of trades) generally become more common towards the end of the war, and were increasingly endorsed and publicized by the Ministry of Pensions – most notably in a tour of ‘cinema talks’ which emphasized the benefits of such training, using filmed records of the trained men at work, and in some cases projected by the graduates of the cinema operation schemes themselves. This increased emphasis on re-habilitation and training for ex-servicemen can in some measure be understood to be a response to the rise of powerful lobbying groups for ex-servicemen such as the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers (NFDDSS), whose leader, James Hogge MP and others, increasingly criticized the Ministry of Pensions’ policies and the quality of the schemes on offer (*Edinburgh Evening News*, 7/9/1918: 4; *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 10/9/1918: 2; *The Scotsman*, 4/10/1918: 3). In the case of the schemes for training cinema operators, Hogge’s criticism seems well placed, for on the announcement of the Armistice the CEA performed a breathtakingly swift volte-face, withdrawing its support from all such schemes and advising those wounded ex-servicemen hoping to move into the cinema trade to look instead elsewhere for employment (*The Era*, 9/4/1919: 18; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 6/3/1919: 52). The industry was careful to emphasize that this policy was merely a result of their reasonable desire to protect ‘the operators of 1914’ who had gone off to war with the promise that their jobs would be open to them on their return (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 16/1/1919: 96). Nevertheless, for many of the disabled men of 1918, it may only have demonstrated what was already implicit in the reports from the exemption appeal tribunals quoted above – that the training of disabled projectionists was, for many cinema managers and perhaps for the industry as a whole, only an expedient, a means to an end which benefited the needs of the industry and the Government, rather than the needs of disabled men.

Practical Patriotism

Throughout the war years, cinema managers threw themselves into the war effort, striving to do good business by responding appropriately to the changes that were sweeping through the lives of their audiences. Good managers sought to make their

cinema the centre of their community, and as demonstrated by Leslie Midkiff Debauche for Wisconsin, and by Michael Hammond for Southampton, the key to the success of policies of ‘practical patriotism’ was to maintain and harness the connection between the cinema, the community and wider war-time concerns. Even when the films on the screen weren’t war films, the decorations in the foyer, the entertainments in between shows, and the wider activities of the cinema within the community through publicity, charity fundraising, or political lobbying, all emphasized their involvement in the national effort. Early in the war this might involve recruiting drives, or celebrations of local men serving at the front, either through the screening of local ‘Rolls of Honour’ films, or through the showing in 1916 of the Official War Pictures such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) (Hammond: 70-127). Each had an emphasis on recognition – on the personal connection between the individual in the local community cinema and the men fighting at the front. Later, as casualties became more numerous, this connection was increasingly expressed through charitable works and fundraising events for some of the 6000 different war-related charities established by 1918 (Cohan: 35). Not surprisingly, some of the most prominent of these were directed towards raising money for the relief of wounded ex-soldiers, and the cinema trade, both on a local and national level was prominent in its support of these. The Lord Roberts Memorial Fund for Disabled Soldiers and Sailors for instance, ran a number of workshops where wounded ex-servicemen could learn a variety of trades, particularly toy-making. The charity sold the toys through special catalogues, as well as in the shops. It was often the recipient of funds raised through special locally arranged events, such as the screening of the ‘latest military and naval films’ advertised at the Empire, Coventry in 1916, or the ‘Cinema Sunday’ advertised in the *Burley Express* in 1918, which saw eleven cinemas in different areas of the town co-operating to screen ‘special films’ for the benefit of the Fund (*Coventry Evening Telegraph* 23/9/1916: 3; *Burnley Express* 6/4/1918: 2).

Nationally too, prominent figures in the trade were seen to ‘do their bit’. Sir Oswald Stoll’s established circuit of music halls and cinemas invited local audiences to contribute to a national cause when he founded his ‘War Seal Foundation’ in 1915:

“War seals on sale at this theatre” is the announcement thrown on the cinema screens at the Manchester Hippodrome and the Ardwick Empire twice each

evening... Briefly, a war seal is a small stamp to be affixed to the back of an envelope and by its sale a fund is being provided for the housing of our disabled soldiers (*Manchester Courier*, 11/8/1915: 5).

The 'Seals' were sold to patrons at a halfpenny each, but cinema patrons were also given other opportunities to contribute to the fund. Mr A. R. Shipman, the musical director of the Cinema de Luxe in Bexhill-on-Sea composed a Waltz ('The Silent Watch'), the profits of which he donated to the fund, and which in return was heavily publicized and played both in his own cinema and in Stoll's flagship venue at the Coliseum in London (*Bexhill-on-Sea Observer* 7/8/1915: 7). Like independent cinema managers across the country, Stoll also frequently gave over his theatres on Sundays to fundraising concerts and screenings, as well as offering free matinee screenings to groups of disabled veterans (*Western Daily Press*, 4/11/1915: 5; *The Era*, 16/5/1917: 19). His charity (now called 'The Oswald Stoll Foundation') still houses disabled veterans in Fulham today. Nathalie Morris notes that the War Seal Foundation wasn't Stoll's only charitable venture. When he moved into film production in 1919 he donated the entire profits of *The Victory Leaders* (Maurice Elvey, 1919) to 'The St Dunstan's After Care Fund for Blinded Soldiers and Sailors', and 60% of the profits for *Comradeship* (Maurice Elvey, 1919) to the 'Comrades of the Great War' (Morris: 147).² Nor was Stoll the only film producer to throw his weight behind wartime campaigns in his productions. Cecil Hepworth's 1918 film *Broken in Wars* was produced specifically to publicize the 'King's Fund for Disabled Officers and Men'. The fund was sanctioned by the Ministry of Pensions, and the minister himself – John Hodge MP, appeared in the film advocating its work. The Cinema Trade Benevolent Fund also threw its weight behind Hodge and the King's Fund, raising a considerable amount of money for it by staging a 'Cinema Gymkhana' and similar activities (*Birmingham Daily Post*, 4/10/1918: 4). Although this particular fund was the cause of some controversy, it is within the context of this and other such schemes of 'practical patriotism' by the cinema trade that the training of disabled operators should be understood.

Training Disabled Operators

As David Williams observes, early in the war, the trade was quite relaxed about the possibility of staff shortages, and while there was some talk in 1915 about retraining

disabled men for a variety of jobs in cinemas, most of these schemes appear to have come to nothing (Williams: 120; *Western Mail*, 27/2/1915: 7). A report presented in Cardiff in October estimated that as many as 10% of total returning soldiers might suffer from some form of disability. In the face of this, it argued, the development of training schemes was essential, for while the Naval and Military War Pensions Bill then before parliament had established the principle of the State's financial responsibility towards such cases, nevertheless:

There was a danger of many thousands of men with small pensions... being dotted all over the country leading absolutely idle lives. In such circumstances they might lose self-respect and if those unfortunate men could be made useful citizens, it would be a good thing for them and would aid the country (*Western Mail*, 5/10/1915: 7).

The report highlighted the work being done at Roehampton where a training centre was attached to the hospital specialising in the re-habilitation of amputees. A national network of training schemes was envisaged. Two rather prophetic questions were raised in the discussion that followed. Firstly the issue of how the Trades Unions would respond to an influx of workers into their skilled trades was summarily brushed aside. Secondly the status of the disability pension was raised – was it guaranteed, or would extra earnings consequent on trainees' newly acquired skills jeopardize it? This question also remained unresolved (*Western Mail*, 23/10/1916: 5).

It took conscription to make the training of disabled ex-servicemen as cinema operators a reality. After the call up of men up to age 41 was introduced on 13th June 1916, the finding and training of staff not eligible for military service became no longer a desirable patriotic act, but rather a necessity for survival. The key scheme – The Cinematograph Trade Employment Bureau for Wounded Soldiers and Sailors – was inaugurated by Paul Kimberley in London, and launched on 25th September 1916. Kimberley, like Stoll, was already a well-known and popular figure in the trade, the agent for the Thanhouser and Lubin Companies and a veteran of earlier film-making (*The Era*, 4/9/1918: 20; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7/11/1918: 83). The announcement of the scheme in *The Era* echoes the sentiments expressed earlier about the

psychological as well as the financial benefits for wounded men of having a skilled occupation, nevertheless there was also a clear message to potential employers that:

...they will be quite capably trained, and there must be NO IDEA of charity, or talk of smaller wages because they will be in receipt of any pensions (*The Era*, 8/11/1916: 19).

The scheme was initially paid for by the Kinematograph Benevolent Fund. The disabled men were referred to it by Mr. Andrews, the medical superintendent at Roehampton, and much of the electrical training was carried out under the supervision of Major Robert Mitchell at the Regent Street Polytechnic. A consummate showman, Kimberley ensured that in the same week that the scheme was launched, members of the trade attending the trade show of the latest Thanhouser and Lubin films at his offices were given the opportunity to meet Andrews and Mitchell and learn the full details of the scheme. After the screening, it was revealed that the films had actually been projected by disabled soldiers and they too were introduced to Kimberley's guests (*The Era*, 8/11/1916: 19). In later weeks further announcements appeared in *The Era* detailing the progress of the scheme. A full list of the men seeking employment through the bureau appeared in late November, which gives a sense of the range of activities it supported. Nine men are named, one looking for an assistant manager position; two for attendant positions; three for doorman positions and three seeking work as projectionists. They are located throughout the UK, including projectionists seeking work in Ireland and in South Wales (*The Era*, 29/11/1916: 20). The notice apparently didn't fall on deaf ears, as a letter the following month from the manager of the Vauxhall Electric Theatre attests. 'Being in need of an operator' he declares:

I decided to try one of these men, so that in a small way I might show my appreciation, and am very pleased to say I have had one of three disabled heroes as my operator for one month and have found him excellent in every way, and can only say that if all the men they train are as capable as the one I am now employing they will be conferring a boon on cinema managers (*The Era* 6/12/1916: 21).

The scheme was evidently successful and within two months the Government, through the Ministry of Labour, in conjunction with the War Pensions Committee, had endorsed the scheme, and was making provision for it to be extended to the ‘great provincial cities’. An advisory committee of the Cinema Trade Council was set up to oversee this work and numerous well known trade names – Kimberley himself, Cecil Hepworth, Will Barker, Frank Goodwin and Sidney Bacon – were nominated as members. They were later joined by representatives of the Amalgamated Musicians Union, the National Association of Theatrical Employees (NATE) and the Electrical Trade Union. This development was, according to *The Era* ‘another gratifying instance of the cordial relations existing between the Government and the cinema industry’ (*The Era*, 28/2/1917: 19). Within months schemes were established in Newcastle, Leeds, Birmingham and Liverpool (*Newcastle Daily Journal*, 5/3/1917: 6; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 22/8/1917: 4; *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 6/9/1917: 4; *Liverpool Echo*, 10/12/1917: 3; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 30/5/1918: 3). It was for Cowan House in Newcastle that Mr Rhagg’s operator had been training his five men before he’d been called up. As with many provincial training schemes, the training of projectionists here was slotted into the wider activities of the institution. Cowan House had been established late in 1916 as a centre for the retraining of wounded soldiers in a variety of occupations. A report from March 1917 revealed that sixty men had benefited from its work to that date, and gave a breakdown of the occupations for which they’d been trained: 32 motor driving and repairs, 14 in boot making, one in cinema operating (although more were on the way), one in linotyping, one in French polishing, three in haircutting and eight in electrical wiring and lighting (*Newcastle Daily Journal*, 5/3/1917: 6). Numerous reports in local papers throughout 1917-1918 confirm that this picture is typical, both in the range of occupations mentioned, and in the proportions (*Dumfries and Galloway Standard*, 9/1/1918: 3; *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press* 27/7/1918: 3; *Leeds Mercury*, 16/12/1918: 7). While cinema operating is prominently showcased in many cases, the vast majority of men in such centres were being trained in motor mechanics, boot-making, woodworking, electrical and other skills. Cowan House could later boast a projection room of its own, kitted out with the latest equipment for the use of its trainees, but it seems likely that in many parts of the country, and particularly in the early months, schemes were reliant on local cinemas throwing open their projection boxes and offering the part-time services of their own projectionists as tutors (*Newcastle Daily*

Journal, 20/4/1918: 4). As we've seen, cinema managers certainly had an incentive to do so, and it's highly likely that the quality of training men received varied widely throughout the country (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 22/1/1919: 3).

Kimberley's school in Wardour Street remained the flagship though, and in December 1917 the operation was expanded with the opening of a second training centre in Soho Square (*The Era* 19/12/1917: 19). A detailed account in *Kinematograph Weekly* emphasized the thoroughness of the training offered and the rigorousness of the examination process, suggesting this as a model for the provincial schemes. The course, it reported, took an average of twelve to fourteen weeks to complete. Men were generally referred to Kimberley from the hospital at Roehampton. They started at the Regent Street Polytechnic where they received an education in electronics, gaining 'a thorough knowledge of the construction and use of motor generators, switchboards, and electrical fittings in connection with kinema work' (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 7/11/1918: 83). Then they moved back to Wardour Street for practical training in film handling, and were introduced to the various types of projectors. They were thoroughly instructed in the handling of these machines, initially using a 'dark' projector. Only later when fully competent were they allowed to operate 'under actual conditions' with the arc lamp burning. Finally they were sent out to a variety of West End cinemas to become familiar with the actual working conditions of commercial projectionists. At the end of their training the men were examined thoroughly: they were expected to answer a range of questions on the theory of electrical circuitry, then they were tested in film handling, joining etc. Finally they were observed while preparing a projector, and putting on an actual show. The projector was booby-trapped with '...little tricks that vengeful operators sometimes play on their successors,'

The condenser was taken out, the lens smeared with grease, wires twisted, the belt removed...(*Kinematograph Weekly*, 7/11/1918: 83)

Only once they had resolved all of these issues, and managed to stage a successful film-show (observing all the necessary fire-safety precautions), were the men passed and awarded the Government certificate that enabled them to seek work. As the

magazine observed, the examination was so thorough that ‘many operators of several years experience might well fail.’

The benefits of the scheme, as emphasized by *Kinematograph Weekly*, were twofold. Firstly, of course, it offered hope to disabled ex-servicemen, for in common with the reports quoted earlier, the psychological benefits which went hand in hand with useful practical work were understood to be beyond question. ‘One cannot imagine anything fairer than to give these boys a fresh start, a new incentive, to make them realize that life can still be worth while, and that there is something to strive for and attain.’ Secondly, it placed on the agenda the possibility that trained projectionists might become the norm. The story’s emphasis on the rigorousness of the training and the absolute necessity of obtaining the ‘Government certificate’ before trainees could seek jobs, was perhaps intended to ameliorate the anxieties of incumbent operators over the possible influx of new men competing for jobs. Certainly it drew a distinct line between the disabled men – trained and competent heroes to whom the country owed a living – and the inexperienced women and youths whose wartime encroachment into the projection box had caused such a lot of concern and anxiety in the trade (Williams: 118-9). Nevertheless, the presence of these trained men could not but highlight the fact that – whether women or youths or ‘experienced’ projectionists – *nobody* else in the business had received such a formal training. *Kinematograph Weekly* admitted as much when it reassured readers that:

There are at present generally more posts than men, for exhibitors are beginning to discover the value of the trained man. The scheme will serve, too, a double purpose, for it must eventually make for better operating conditions (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 7/11/1918: 83).

Facial Disfigurement?

At first glance the role of cinema projectionist seems curiously unsuitable for disabled workers. Unlike basket-weaving, or boot-making (both popular trades for training schemes), projection was not a sedentary occupation. All but the most modern cinemas were still equipped with hand-cranked projectors, requiring the projectionist to stand by his machine, making a constant and steady physical exertion to keep it running at the correct speed. Film reels are heavy, and the projectionist had to lift

them above his head in order to load the machine. Older projection booths were often cramped, pokey and cluttered rooms, claustrophobic to work in, accessed only by a narrow staircase and subject to excessive heat. The need to maintain focus and racking meant that good eyesight was also essential (*Lichfield Mercury*, 21/9/1917: 4). Perhaps it is these apparent contradictions that have led to the recent notion that those disabled ex-servicemen who were trained as projectionists had primarily suffered injuries leading to facial disfigurement. This connection was made by Luke McKernan writing as ‘Urbanora’ in his blog *The Bioscope* in 2008. Describing James R. Cameron’s 1919 American manual on *The Instruction of Disabled Men in Motion Picture Projection*, McKernan quotes Cameron’s statement that any man ‘with both hands intact’ could be trained for the projection booth, and the fact that (as with Kimberley) the majority of his pupils were suffering from leg injuries – either paralysis or amputation. No mention of facial injuries is made in the book. Nevertheless, McKernan links his post to the website of an exhibition about the work of Sir Harold Gillies whose pioneering plastic surgery techniques attempted to reconstruct the faces of men who had suffered disfiguring injuries ‘so terrible that they were unrecognizable to family and friends.’ McKernan goes on to speculate on the suitability of projection work for such men, whom he suggests, ‘could arrive at work before anyone else, spend their working day on their own, shut away from society, and then return home in darkness’ (McKernan, 2008). This figure of the tragically disfigured man, hiding away in his projection booth, affording cinematic pleasure to audiences who are blissfully unaware of his terrible plight, is certainly a powerful one, and appears to have gained some traction in recent years. He re-appears in Jeremy Paxman’s BBC documentary *Great Britain’s Great War*, evoked again in the context of Gillies’ reconstructive surgery work. And he also features in BBC Radio 4’s flagship centenary drama *Home Front* in the character of Dennis Monk.³ I myself have been seduced by the idea (Napper: 20). However, while it’s certainly possible that some of the men trained as projectionists may have suffered facial injuries, they were unlikely to have been as severely injured as Gillies’ patients – those men were in full time treatment long after 1919.⁴ I now suspect that the association between disabled projectionists and facial disfigurement cases is largely misleading. The notion of a projectionist hiding completely away in the box is in any case a romantic one, ignoring as it does the more varied duties involved in the role –

taking delivery of films, repairing electrical systems, training and managing assistants and so forth.

In common with McKernan, I have been unable to find any explicit reference to facially disfigured projectionists. Most reports tend not mention the exact nature of the trainees' injuries. Those that do, refer to injured or amputated limbs. Reporting on the formation of Paul Kimberley's scheme in November 1916, *The Era* stated baldly that:

It is quite conceivable how a man who is injured in the legs is, if trained, perfectly able to operate in the projecting box, while a man who has lost the use of an arm can make quite a good doorkeeper or attendant (*The Era*, 8/11/1916:19).

Kimberley's scheme, as we have seen, had an arrangement with the hospital at Roehampton, which had already acquired a reputation as a centre for the provision of artificial limbs. A widely syndicated article described the hospital's work, and claimed it had placed patients in positions as 'cinema operators' among a wealth of other professions from architecture to toy-making (*Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, 18/8/1916: 3). A year later, the gossip columnist of the *Daily Mirror* reported meeting six of Kimberley's trainees 'who each had lost a limb' at a Savoy Tea for wounded soldiers. They demonstrated their skills by screening a Charlie Chaplin film 'with éclat' for the benefit of their comrades (*The Daily Mirror*, 5/6/1917: 10; *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 6/9/1917: 4). These references to amputation aren't of course a completely reliable indicator of the most common injuries suffered by trainee operators. Joanna Bourke describes the hierarchy of injury that developed during the war years (Bourke: 59). Those with the most visible wounds, or the spectacular absence of body parts, she suggests, were afforded more sympathy than those with less obvious internal damage, or with debilitating but invisible diseases. The omission of details about other kinds of injuries suffered by trainees in most reports might be because they were too mundane to elicit much sympathy, rather than because they were too terrible to be named.

'Recalled To Life'

In fact, far from being hidden away in the projection box, disabled men were very much placed on display throughout 1918 as cinema became central to the way in which the Ministry of Pensions publicized its various schemes for training disabled soldiers. In 1918 the Ministry released an ‘official’ short film entitled *Repairing War Ravages*, which showed disabled men learning a variety of new trades at the St Mary’s Workshop in Roehampton. It appears to have been distributed to commercial cinemas in January 1918, taking its place in the general programme, sometimes advertised in accordance with the tenets of ‘practical patriotism’ as a film to which ‘silver badged men’ and hospital patients would be admitted half price, or even free of charge (*Hull Daily Mail*, 22/1/1918: 2; *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser* 22/2/1918: 5; *Walsall Observer and South Staffordshire Chronicle*, 2/2/1918: 4).

Repairing War Ravages survives in the collection of the Imperial War Museum and it does indeed remain a moving testament to the work done at Roehampton and to the men trained there, while at the same time displaying their disabilities (and their new abilities) as spectacular visual pleasures for the audience. The film opens with the men filing past the camera, gazing back at the lens as they pass. The composition of the shot is reminiscent of the famous ‘recognition’ sequences in *The Battle of the Somme* (Malins/MacDowell, 1916) where the marching troops smile and wave as they pass the camera. While some are smiling here (and some are smoking), most of the men simply gaze back at the camera. Most of them are either missing a leg and walking on two crutches, or are missing one or both arms. Their clothes are neatly folded back, or hang loose where the limb is absent. The artificial limbs for which Roehampton was famous are not in evidence here. Two men in wheelchairs – one missing both legs, one an arm and a leg – create extra visual interest by negotiating the ramp over which they are all walking. The next scene shows them being addressed by a representative of the Ministry of Pensions. In inter-titles he stresses that pensions and salary will be paid throughout the training process, and then he shows the men a list of the various trades they may choose. Through the rest of the film we are shown men being trained for a variety of the occupations listed – secretarial work, accounting, leatherwork, electrical wiring, poultry keeping, wood work, motor-mechanics, tyre repair, driving, basket making, wood turning, and of course, cinema projection. Some of these scenes involve spectacular acts by the disabled men, designed to impress the audience. One man fitted with a wooden arm practises using

it to support a large bird which has been trussed up by the feet. A man without legs gets into a car, and drives off, and another fits an artificial arm which has been specially modified to incorporate a chisel for use in wood turning. However, the sequence showing cinema projectionists is not constructed in this way. The two cinema trainees and their instructor are framed from the waist up. They have leg injuries, although this fact is only evident late in the sequence. Instead the projector itself is the main source of visual interest. One trainee operates the machine. He cranks the handle at a regular pace and the other man inspects the film as it goes through the gate. The instructor indicates that the operator should stop, and when he does, adjusts the loop at the top of the gate so that the film enters the intermittent motion mechanism more easily. Automatically as he stops the film, the trainee pushes into place the metal guard which protects the stationary flammable nitrate from the hot glare of the lamp, and then releases it again when he resumes cranking, although – as in the description of Kimberley’s school – the lamp is not burning in the machine at this stage, and there is no beam of light.

The connection between the projectionists displayed on screen and the men in new posts as operators around the country was not lost on some audiences. When the film was screened at the Rink Theatre in Wrexham as part of a lecture, it was:

...announced amid applause that a disabled man belonging to Wrexham had been trained as a cinema operator, was now employed at the Rink Theatre and would operate the machine for the purpose of the lecture (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 24/1/1918: 2).

At a similar event in the City Palace Electric Theatre, Exeter, a member of the audience recognized himself on screen: ‘He is Mr. C.W. Jenkins, operator at the Empire Theatre, a post which he holds as a result of the scheme, which he enthusiastically applauds’ (*Western Times*, 27/2/1918:2).

Repairing War Ravages was not the only cinematic representation of the various training schemes in operation (although it is the only one I’ve been able to find showing projectionists). A film of the work at St Dunstan’s Hostel for blinded soldiers and sailors also circulated in early 1918, as well as films showing the work of

Lord Roberts' Workshops, the training of disabled men in diamond polishing in Brighton, and a Pathe film, *St Mary's Workshop* which also shows the hospital at Roehampton (*Gloucester Echo*, 12/2/1918: 2). The Pathe film survives, and is structured in a similar fashion to *Repairing War Ravages*. Again, some scenes are evidently designed to astonish the audience with spectacular displays – one shot shows the men playing cricket, and another shows a man with both legs amputated below the knee climbing a stepladder. The sequence that attracted comment however was one showing men being lectured to by an instructor, who stands at a blackboard and writes on it in large letters the word 'Stickability'. As the *Liverpool Daily Post* reported:

A new war word is 'stickability', the meaning of which is obvious. It was coined by one of the men engaged in the work of training discharged and disabled sailors and soldiers under the auspices of local war pensions committees, and much amusement was occasioned at a cinema lecture in Seacombe the other evening, by a picture showing the lecturer and his class... (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 12/2/1918:3)

Throughout 1918 the Ministry of Pensions made cinema (and these films in particular) central to its strategy for publicizing its training schemes both to disabled veterans who might benefit from them, and to the wider public. The screenings noted above at Wrexham, Exeter and Liverpool were part of a Ministry of Pensions 'Cinema Talk' entitled 'Recalled to Life' which was presented by Arthur B. Malden 'of the War Pensions Ministry' throughout the year (*Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 29/3/1919: 4). The talk combined these films with magic lantern slides illustrating all aspects of the various training schemes overseen by the Ministry. The apparently inexhaustible Malden travelled throughout the country addressing audiences in a vast range of provincial towns and gaining fulsome reviews in all of the local papers.

Aside from publicizing the Ministry's work, two key incentives for these talks emerge from the reports, both of them about combatting the apparent reluctance of potential trainees to come forward. Firstly, it is clear that the generally high level of wages for unskilled jobs in the period operated as a disincentive for ex-servicemen to volunteer for training. The talks emphasized the benefits of long-term skilled work over the

temptation of highly paid temporary jobs (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 25/1/1918: 2; *Edinburgh Evening News*, 7/9/1918: 4). The second issue related to the vexed question of pensions. Evidently the uncertainties of 1916 had stuck in men's minds. Again and again Malden and the people who introduced him emphasized that entitlement to disability pension was a right that had been earned through war service, and therefore pension awards would not be offset by the higher earnings associated with skilled labour. Malden himself is often quoted in the reports, referring to the:

Minister of Pensions' desire and determination that soldiers who were disabled or had lost limbs shall be properly trained and enabled to go into the industrial world at a proper wage, irrespective of their pensions. They had fought and sacrificed much for their pension and it must never be considered when dealing with wages (*Western Daily Press*, 26/2/1918:4; See also, *Western Daily Press*, 16/7/1918: 2).

The status of the schemes remained controversial however, and Malden's talks themselves seem to have afforded some opportunity for the grievances of disabled ex-servicemen to be aired. At Exeter for instance, a disabled member of the 'Comrades of the Great War' spoke up at the end of Malden's talk, claiming that the training schemes offered were inadequate, and that disabled men were being 'exploited' by them. He was not alone in these opinions, and 'other speakers followed in the same vein' (*Western Times*, 27/2/1918: 2). Throughout 1918 the difficulty of persuading Trades Unions to accept new trainees was another persistent theme of criticism (*Newcastle Daily Journal*, 20/4/1918: 4).

As the veterans' organizations became stronger, so their criticism grew. Things came to a head in September 1918 when John Hodge MP – the Pensions Minister himself – was heckled at the opening of the Inter-Allied Conference Exhibition in Birmingham. Dissatisfied disabled men shouted down his claims as to the adequacy of the pension and the efficiency of his office in dealing with complaints, and demonstrated their dissatisfaction with the training schemes on display in the Exhibition (*Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 10/9/1918: 3). Importantly, the disabled men were supported by the editorial of the *Birmingham Gazette*, which repeated and elaborated their criticisms. 'Mr John Hodge found out yesterday, not for the first time, that there is considerable

dissatisfaction among the men,’ stated the paper, adding that he ‘...does not inspire confidence as an administrator’ (*Birmingham Gazette* 10/9/1918: 2). The paper went on to quote figures previously published in the disabled veterans’ magazine *Reveille* which suggested that despite the Government’s initiatives, 145,000 discharged men remained ‘unemployed or unemployable’. The paper also claimed that Hodge had done little to combat the two disincentives to training which were well known – the temptation of higher paid temporary labour, and the anxiety over pension provision.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the editorial acknowledged an intractable problem, which was to become more and more troublesome in the coming months. ‘Much as we owe to the disabled soldiers,’ it acknowledged, ‘we also owe economic security to the men who expect to come back safe and sound to their own jobs, and to the general army of workers.’

The End of the War and the Disabled Operator

The Armistice of November 1918 completely transformed the situation both for disabled projectionists and for the industry. It didn’t take long for the change to be expressed in the trade press. ‘Don’t Pity a Disabled Man! GIVE HIM A JOB’ *Kinematograph Weekly* had proclaimed in a banner headline during the week of the Armistice (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 14/11/1918: 113). By January the paper tempered its praise of the scheme training schemes which it had enthusiastically supported, with a warning that neglect of another pressing issue might bring ‘lasting disgrace on the whole industry’:

I refer to the finding of jobs for the men – experienced and efficient operators in particular – who answered their country’s call in the early days of the war, and who will shortly be returning to civil life (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 16/1/1919: 96).

The paper’s letters pages soon bristled with accounts of returning men who had been refused jobs because their replacements – young boys and women – were successfully fulfilling their duties for lower wages (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 6/2/1919: 104). Disabled men who had graduated from schemes like Kimberley’s were spared the

opprobrium heaped on teenage and female operators, and indeed initially the paper seemed sanguine about their prospects:

There is not the slightest need to turn a single trained soldier-operator adrift in order to find work for the returning operators. There are about four thousand picture theatres in this country, and if out of that number two hundred positions cannot be reserved for the two hundred disabled men who have been specially trained in order to enter the Industry, then something is wrong somewhere (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 16/1/1919: 96).

The training of the disabled men was also widely hailed as the model for a solution to the more general problem of incompetent projection throughout the industry. The certificate awarded to Kimberley's men, it was suggested, could be introduced across the board. (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 26/12/1918: 56). The machinery existed, it was argued, thanks to the disabled schemes, for the swift training and licensing of all the returning operators of 1914:

Think what it means. A reliable and experienced man in every operating box in the country; the elimination of that constant fear of fire and probable catastrophe – the direct result of inefficiency – which would bring in its train all sorts of regulations and restrictions for the conduct of picture theatres generally – and operating boxes in particular (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 16/1/1919: 96).

As Jon Burrows outlines in this volume, this period saw a renewed drive to represent projectionists by various unions, and the promise of adequate training and professionalisation through unionisation is very much part of these debates. Nevertheless, the training schemes for disabled operators themselves proved to be a swift casualty. Only three months after its optimistic assessment of the prospects for disabled operators, *Kinematograph Weekly* had changed its tune, making clear in March 1919 that, 'our advice to those desirous of becoming operators is the same as the famous advice of *Punch* on the question of marriage – Don't!' (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 6/3/1919: 52).

A week later, the chairman of the Yorkshire Joint Disablement Committee reported that their cinema operating scheme had been discontinued as a result of a sharp indication from the local trade that no more men could be absorbed – so urgent was the message that several men in the midst of their training had to be withdrawn and put to another trade. ‘It would seem’ he suggested dryly, ‘that now the war is over the trade has abandoned its interest in the wounded and discharged soldier’ (*Yorkshire Post*, 11/3/1919: 12). This cynical comment was barbed enough to be reported in the national trade press, and to elicit a lengthy repost from the trade, calling the statement ‘foolish’ and reiterating that the schemes were being abandoned not out of lack of sympathy or gratitude for the men, but because ‘it would be worse than futile to continue training men for work, when there is no prospect of being able to guarantee them jobs when qualified’ (*Kinematograph Weekly*, 20/3/1919: 53; *Yorkshire Post*, 12/3/1919: 4).

Despite an appeal from the Ministry of Labour, and even a letter from the Prime Minister himself, the General Council of the CEA officially withdrew their support for the training schemes the following month, stating that ‘whilst the Association had the deepest sympathy and the keenest interest in the appeal, it was not considered, in view of the men returning to their posts that more could be done than had already been achieved’ (*The Era*, 9/4/1919: 18).

Conclusion

The training of disabled ex-servicemen as cinema operators was not a unique phenomenon. As we have seen, a wide variety of similar schemes existed, training men in everything from tailoring and toy-making to car mechanics and electrical engineering. Nor were the numbers of operators trained particularly significant. The trade’s own estimate suggested only around 200 men benefitted from the scheme, and it seems likely that many of them did not go on to take up full-time employment in cinemas (*Yorkshire Post*, 12/3/1919: 4). The abrupt abandonment of the scheme at the end of the war too, is typical of the change of attitudes towards disabled men in the post-war period, as Joanna Bourke has demonstrated (Bourke: 31-75). The significance of the story for film historians, I would argue, is that it illustrates the importance of ‘practical patriotism’ methods for the cinema industry, and offers a useful example of the way in which the war acted as a catalyst to the increasing

acceptance of cinema itself in official circles, and its increasing use for political and propaganda purposes. In this it can be placed alongside the more familiar story of the *Battle of the Somme* and the 'Official War Films'. For the Ministry of Pensions, disabled operators offered not only a very visual and appropriate demonstration of the work being done for disabled ex-servicemen, but the machine which they operated became a key method for publicizing the Ministry's works to a wider audience – a connection which was enthusiastically adopted both by the Ministry and by the cinema trade itself.

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¹ Despite Smith's claim, women *were* employed in large numbers as projectionists during the war, see David Williams, 'Ladies of the lamp: The employment of women in the British film trade during World War 1' in *Film History*, Vol. 9, 1997. Smith refers to an incident at Deptford on 28th April 1917 when four children were crushed to death when the audience panicked, attempting to escape an auditorium they mistakenly believed to be on fire (*The Echo*, 30/4/1917: 2).

² The Comrades of the Great War was a veterans' organization founded by Lord Derby explicitly as a more right wing alternative to the more radical NFDDSS, and National Association of Discharged Sailors and Soldiers (NADSS).

³ My thanks to Nicky Smith for drawing my attention to this storyline.

⁴ My thanks to Karen Randall for this information.